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## Just Doodling? Brian Ó Nualláin's 'Tribunal of Inquiry into the Fire at St Joseph's Orphanage Cavan' Notebook

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Christian Dupont (*Associate University Librarian for Collections and Burns Librarian, Boston College*) considers the doodles in a notebook Brian Ó Nualláin kept as secretary for the 1943 Cavan orphanage fire tribunal, and which is included in the Flann O'Brien papers held at the John J. Burns Library, Boston College.

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Just doodling? So was Samuel Beckett, who often sketched odd little figures in his writing notebooks. In the manuscript for his short story 'Suite,' held by the John J. Burns Library at Boston College, Beckett filled several blank pages opposite the text with ant-like creatures (Figure 1).



**Figure 1** Samuel Beckett, detail of doodling in 'Suite,' 1946, facing page [17] [11.5 × 6.5 cm]. Samuel Beckett Collection, John J. Burns Library, MS.1991.001, Box 11, folder 9.

Out of context, one might think they were illustrations for *The Insect Play* by the Brothers Čapek, or its adaptation by 'Myles na gCopaleen,' staged by the Gate Theatre in 1943. Ondřej Pilný has recently shown that when Myles sent his original typescript to the Gate's Hilton Edwards, he 'included drawings of his ideas of the insects (now lost) in the margins.'<sup>1</sup> While these sketches are lost to us, we do have one notable notebook in which Myles's doodling is on full display.

That same year, 1943, acting in his civic capacity and name, Brian Ó Nualláin served as secretary for the public tribunal charged with investigating the devastating fire that killed 35 children at the St Joseph orphanage in Cavan, which was run by the Poor Clare order of nuns. The front and back covers of the notebook he kept are strewn with doodles of faces and hands, tables and chairs, and stylised lettering (Figure 2).

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<sup>1</sup> Ondřej Pilný, 'The Brothers Čapek at the Gate: R.U.R. and *The Insect Play*,' in *Cultural Convergence: The Dublin Gate Theatre, 1928–1960*, ed. Ondřej Pilný, Ruud van den Beuken, and Ian R. Walsh (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), [https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-57562-5\\_6](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-57562-5_6). I am grateful to Paul Fagan for pointing me to Pilný's essay.

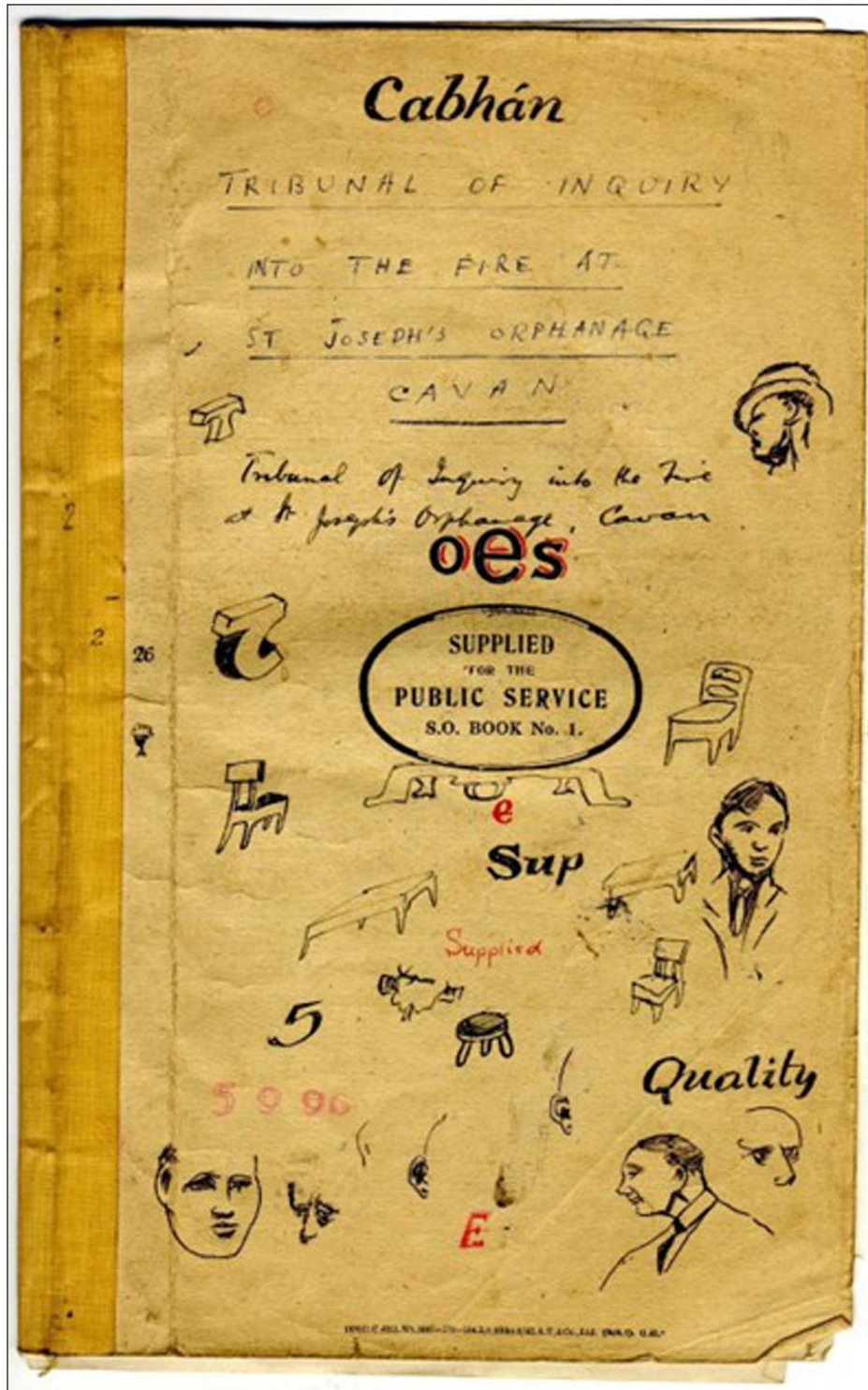
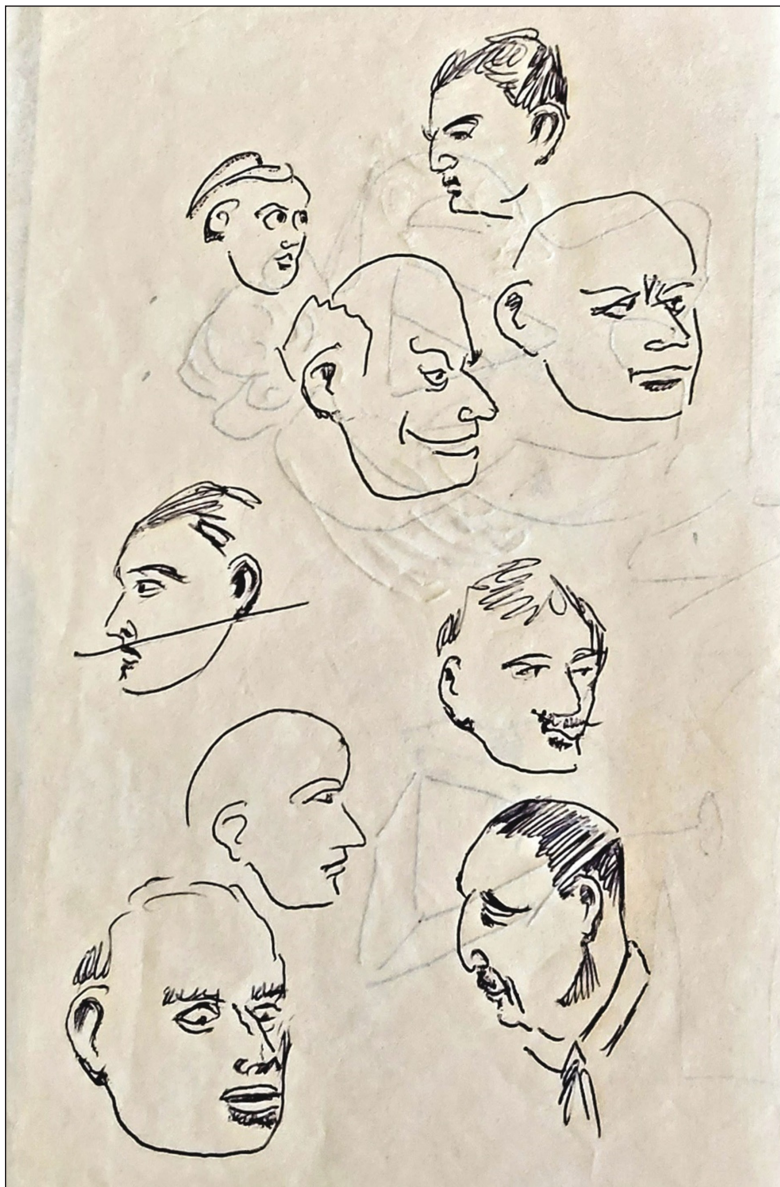


Figure 2 Brian Ó Nualláin, front cover of notebook titled 'Tribunal of Inquiry into the Fire at St. Joseph's Orphanage Cavan' [April, 1943] [21.5 x 31.5 cm]. Flann O'Brien Papers, John J. Burns Library, MS.1997.027, Box 5, folder 16.

The concluding lines of the published report thank Ó Nualláin for his ‘assiduous care and attention’ and ‘unceasing help.’ Yet the copious doodling and contents of the notebook itself suggest that he was subject to distraction, sketching what one presumes are caricatures of those who conducted or appeared at the hearings (Figure 3), and perhaps even a self-portrait or two in the lower left and upper right covers of the front cover (Figure 2).



**Figure 3** Brian Ó Nualláin, detail from notebook titled ‘Tribunal of Inquiry into the Fire at St. Joseph’s Orphanage Cavan’ [April 1943] [21.5 × 31.5 cm]. Flann O’Brien Papers, John J. Burns Library, MS.1997.027, Box 5, folder 16.

Several pages were torn out and destroyed or lost. The remaining pages include only scant references to the proceedings, containing for the most part quotations and statistics copied from various sources pertaining to Irish-language debates and an outline for an essay on the topic. An unpublished and incomplete typescript of some 40 pages titled 'The Pathology of Revivalism' survived alongside the notebook. Critic Carol Taaffe has observed that though 'its preoccupations are familiar from *Cruiskeen Lawn*, the tone of this manuscript—part cultural history and sober statistical analysis, part anti-revivalist polemic—reveals O'Nolan's opinions with a clarity unusual for a writer whose voice was more often masked by the ironies of Myles na gCopaleen.'<sup>2</sup> In fact, the celebrated columnist and author of the parodic *An Béal Bocht* all but abandoned writing in Irish by 1944.

Disillusioned by the politics of linguistic and cultural revivalism and despondent over the failures of his plays and rejections of his attempt at a second novel in English (*The Third Policeman* was first published in 1967, after his death in 1966), Ó Nualláin was also seemingly dispirited by the tribunal's conclusions, which traced the fire to a drafty chimney flue or electrical fault but refrained from assigning blame for the otherwise avoidable loss of life.

Biographer and friend Anthony Cronin claimed that over pints in a pub after one of the hearings, Ó Nualláin and T. F. O'Higgins, counsel for the Electricity Supply Board and later Chief Justice and Presidential candidate, penned a sarcastic limerick:

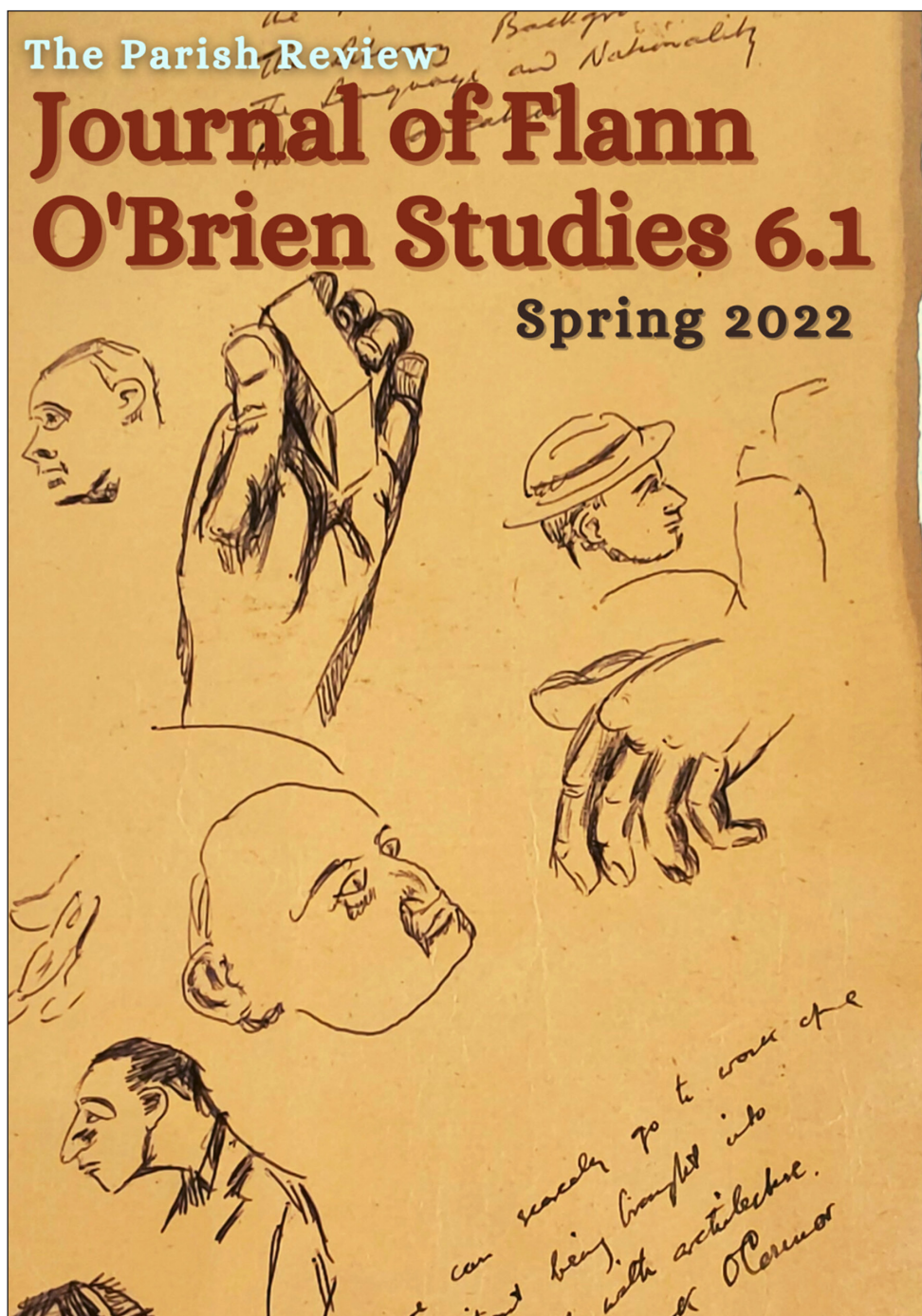
In Cavan there was a great fire,  
Judge McCarthy was sent to inquire,  
If the nuns were to blame,  
It would be a shame,  
So it had to be caused by a wire.<sup>3</sup>

Are these just doodles and rhymes, or signs of a sensitive and disturbed conscience?

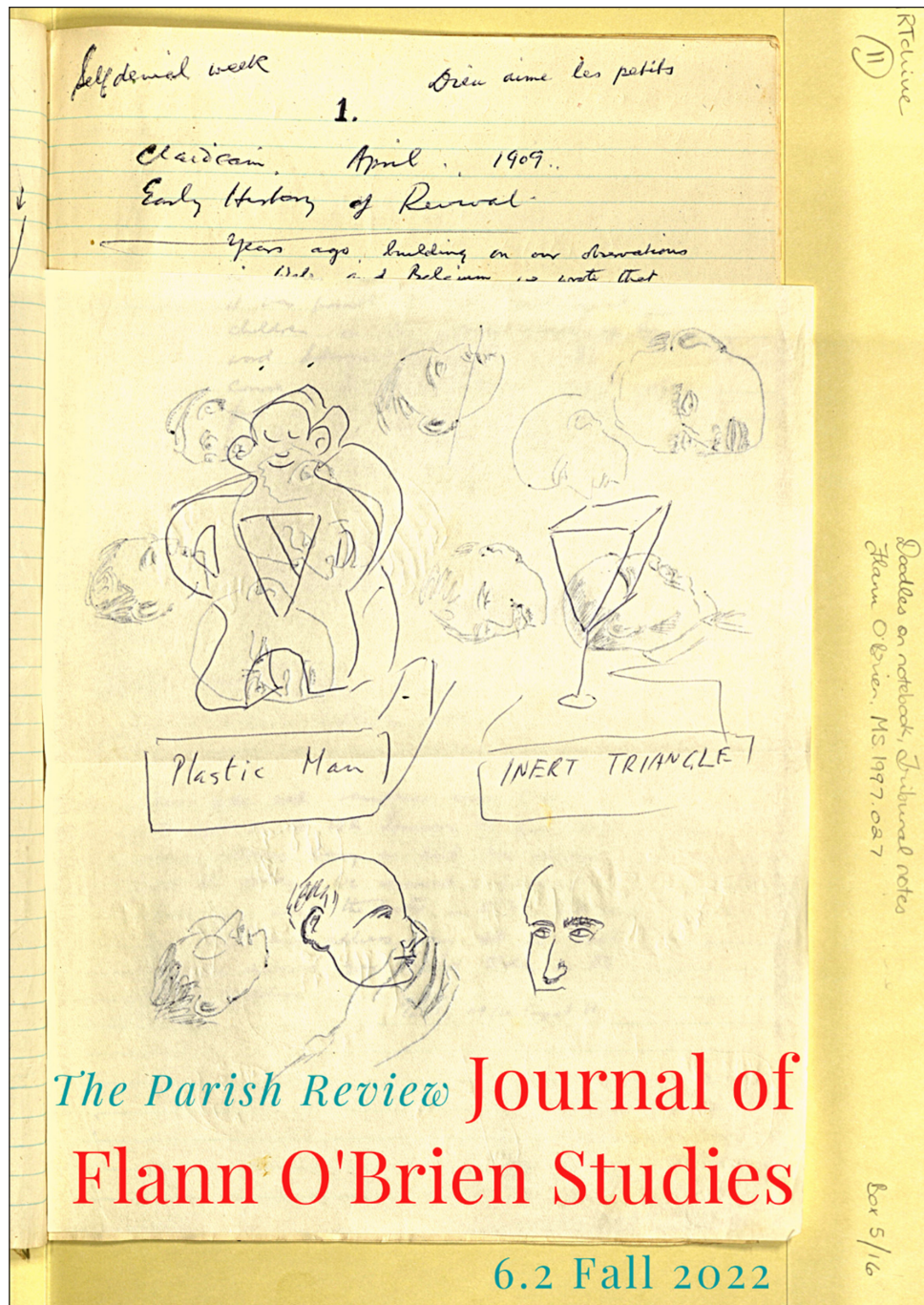
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<sup>2</sup> Carol Taaffe, 'The Pathology of Revivalism: An Unpublished Manuscript by Myles na gCopaleen,' *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 32, no. 2 (Fall, 2006): 27.

<sup>3</sup> Anthony Cronin, *No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O'Brien* (New York: Fromm International, 1998), 138.



**Figure 4** Cover of *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies* 6, no. 1, 'Brian O'Nolan and the Civil Service' (Spring 2022), designed by Paul Fagan, image by Brian Ó Nualláin, detail from notebook titled 'Tribunal of Inquiry into the Fire at St. Joseph's Orphanage Cavan' [April 1943] [21.5 × 31.5 cm]. Flann O'Brien Papers, John J. Burns Library, MS.1997.027, Box 5, folder 16.



**Figure 5** Cover of *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies* 6, no. 2, 'Brian O'Nolan and the Civil Service' (Fall 2022), designed by Paul Fagan, image by Brian Ó Nualláin, detail from notebook titled 'Tribunal of Inquiry into the Fire at St. Joseph's Orphanage Cavan' [April 1943] [21.5 × 31.5 cm]. Flann O'Brien Papers, John J. Burns Library, MS.1997.027, Box 5, folder 16.

### Acknowledgements

All images accompanying this article were provided courtesy of John J. Burns Library. An earlier version of this essay appeared under the title 'Just Doodling' in the *Irish Arts Review* 35, no. 4 (2018): 60. Available at: <http://hdl.handle.net/2345/bc-ir:108975>.

### Editors' Note

Since *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies* 6.1 and 6.2, a special double issue, is dedicated to answering such questions under the rubric of 'Brian O'Nolan and the Civil Service,' it is appropriate that its cover images feature details of Ó Nualláin's doodles from the notebook he kept in his role as Secretary for the 1943 Tribunal of Inquiry into the Fire at St Joseph's Orphanage, Main Street, Cavan (**Figures 4 and 5**). Flanneurs who wish to follow the matter up further can find the original notebook among the Flann O'Brien papers held at the John J. Burns Library, Boston College.

### Competing Interests

Christian Dupont serves on the advisory board of *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies* but was not involved in the acceptance process of this note.

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